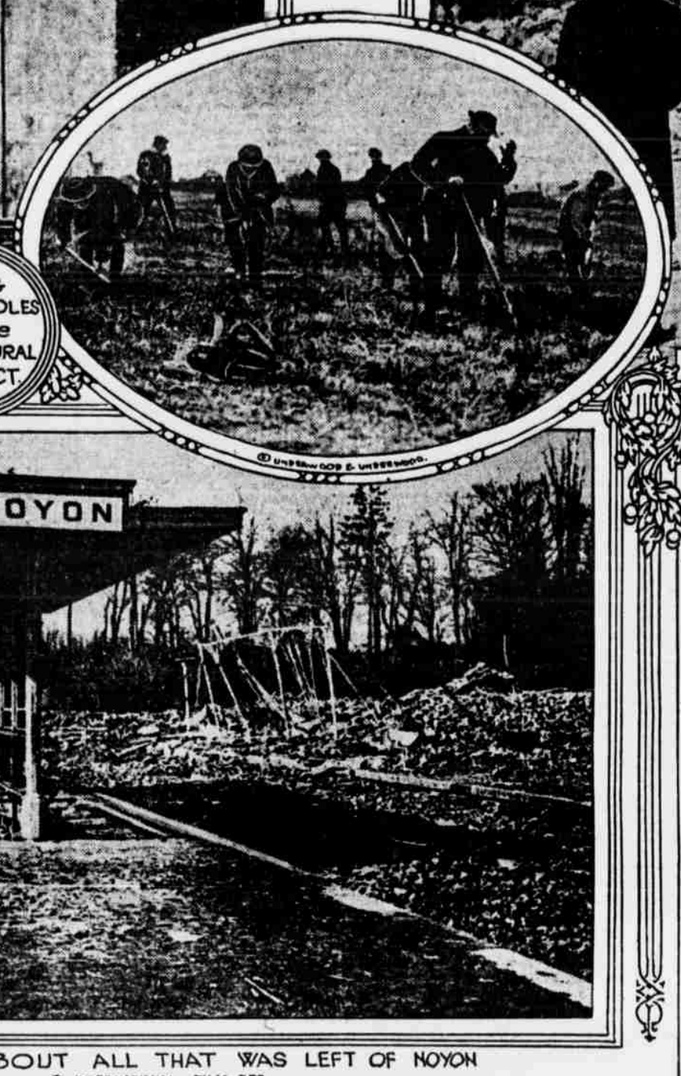
How France Is Reconstituting Broken Lives and Blasted Lands

SOLDIERS HELPING TO REBUILD ARRAS © UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD.



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INHABITANTS OF SENLIS GAZE UPON THE HAVOC WROUGHT © UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD.

A CORNER OF RHEIMS, ONE OF THE WORST BATTERED OF FRENCH CITIES.

Government, in Reconstructing 6,000 Square Miles of Desolation, Copes With Problem Greater Than Meeting German Invasion—Refugees Develop Self-Help to Remarkable Degree

By M. K. WISEHEART.

IN organizing to reconstruct the devastated regions, which are 6,000 square miles in extent, France is confronted with a vastly greater problem than she faced in 1914, when she organized to meet the German invasion. Then she had a coordinated system of transportation and supply; now this system is in ruins and for five years the nation has been living on its reserves. The problem before France and those who wish to see her assume a noble position economically and industrially in a world at peace is bigger in extent and kind than any the world has had before.

Americans, who ask why France does not organize to meet the reconstruction problem with the same energy with which she organized to meet the German advance in 1914, probably have failed to grasp the full meaning of reconstruction and to understand the condition in which France finds herself at the end of the war. The French with their nearness to the problem have a preference for the word "reconstitution" rather than "reconstruction." "Reconstitution" is the better word, for it emphasizes the complicated nature of the task, the great social phase of the problem as well as matters of actual rebuilding.

Problems of Reconstitution.

"Reconstitution" calls attention to the fact not only that the houses and factories of this vast area are in ruins, but that for five years this August the area has been an utterly unproductive one, from which millions of people have been displaced with the result that their habits have been changed and perhaps their courage broken; that together with the reestablishment of transportation, food supply and building material distribution agencies must also be established to keep up the morale of the people, to make life endurable in the midst of desolation, to encourage thousands who have come to feel that the State owes them a living to turn their heart and hand to agriculture.

Facts and figures may give some idea of the problem confronting France in the way of reconstruction, but reconstitution—that is a matter of the spirit, of courage to endure the bitterest desolation while the community life by slow process is restored and the normal peace activities reknit. So figures as to devastation can give only suggestively the meaning of reconstitution. Five hundred thousand buildings have been damaged, of which 250,000 have been completely destroyed. One thousand five hundred schools and 1,200 churches and about as many town halls have been destroyed. Two hundred and fifty thousand acres of the richest agricultural land of France, which gave occupation to 807,000 people, or 10 per cent. of the working agricultural population, have been rendered uncultivatable. Fifty-five per cent. of the nation's cattle and the same percentage of pigs have been lost. The war has cost France 10 per cent. of her lumber and 6 1-2 per cent. of her firewood.

Probably the best informed American to-day on the many complicated phases of reconstruction and reconstitution is Major George B. Ford, who went to France in 1916 as a member of the American Industrial Commission. He has been in charge of the Reconstruction Department of the American Red Cross in France, which has cooperated with all the various departments of the French Government devoted to reconstitution.

Major Ford is well known in the United States as an expert in his field. He was the technical man consulted by the New York Board of Estimate when the New York zoning law was framed. He is well known as an architect and city planner. He designed the State capital of Wisconson. He has had charge of the planning of many American cities, including Newark, Jersey City, Omaha, Neb., Cleveland, Ohio.

The main features of the reconstruction problem in France are reviewed by Major Ford in the following interview:

"It is only by realizing that the devastated area is as big as Rhode Island and Connecticut and part of Massachusetts combined that Americans can begin to get an idea of the immensity of the reconstruction problem confronting France. They must realize that more buildings have been destroyed than there are in the whole of Greater New York.

"The problem of reconstruction divides itself into several classes: First, rebuilding and repairs to destroyed buildings, of which the total is about 450,000. The estimated cost of rebuilding is $5,000,000,000. Second, restoring the public works, railroads, canals, highways, water works, ports, &c., for which at least another $4,000,000,000 will be necessary; third, recuperation from the industrial damage, the destruction of factories, material, finished products, power plants, &c., including mines and quarries, which amounts to another $4,000,000,000; fourth, reparation for the agricultural damage through the ruin of a vast tract of soil, destruction of agricultural machinery, loss of cattle, the removal of tools, which amounts to a bill of $2,000,000,000.

"If you were one of the 500,000 refugees who came back to France from Germany or one of the 1,750,000 who lived in the interior of France during the war would you want to return to your own hearthstone amid the ruins of the devastated area? If you did return what conditions would you find there? How would you get food, coal, furniture, working tools? Do you think you would have the heart to stay there after arriving—in a desert of shell ripped fields and scattered ruins your own perhaps the only family for miles around? Would you have the courage to become one of the hardy pioneering stock that is taking up the burden of life under these conditions? Or would you, as many do, turn sick at heart and return to the interior of France?

"If you decided to stay, what facilities would you find the Government of France able to put at your disposal for resuming the old home life?

"What the French Government is now doing toward reconstruction in the devastated area can best be understood by looking at the subject from the point of view of one of the individuals concerned. Take the case of a refugee, either one of the 500,000 who came back from Germany by way of Switzerland or one of the 1,750,000 evacuees who went to the interior of France. If a refugee family wants to go back to the liberated regions it first goes to the Mayor of the town where the family is at present located. They ask how they can get back and how they can get furnishings and food when they arrive.

"The Mayor will be obliged to tell them that he can do nothing except give them a note telling where they have been living and asking permission for them of the prefecture of the department where they wish to go. This note will be referred to the subprefect, who will take it up with the Mayor or the acting Mayor of the town the family came from. The granting of permission to return will then depend upon food conditions and transportation, and the sub-prefect has to get the sanction of the military authorities before he can give the desired permission. This double authorization is always necessary under present conditions before a family can return.

"The first permission granted is in most cases for a forty-eight hour visit for a look at the ruins of a family's home and for the salvage of buried treasure, such as spoons, linen, keepsakes. After the permission is granted the family takes the first regular train it can get. To defray expenses of car fare the family gets an indemnity from the Government. Sometimes the whole family goes, or perhaps just the father, if he has leave, and the mother. They are allowed to take 600 pounds of baggage free.

"On arriving at the railroad point nearest their home the refugees must walk or catch a ride if they can. If they expect to stay over night they must have provided themselves with food and blankets. The first thing they do on reaching the home town is to report to the authorities if there are any there. Then they go to seek their own heathstone. It is a sad sight—one of the saddest, and it is being repeated day after day always with sorrowful variations throughout the devastated area.

Most of Them Turn Back.

"Most of the refugees find that there is nothing they can do immediately. They find no way of getting food, utensils, supplies of any kind; so in nine cases out of ten they decide to go back to stay a while in the interior of France until there is better organization in the devastated regions. The other tenth decides to stay on the scene of desolation at all costs. So in various scattered villages of the district one finds one, two or three families of great courage living in cellars, icantos or some sort of shelter with a patched or tar paper roof.

"In the small villages they can get no food at all, so one member of the family walks every day to the nearest big town for bread and vegetables. They have to tramp miles and miles to get this limited supply, for there are very few animals of any sort in this territory. Those who decide to stay and ask for the *permis de sejour* are pioneers of the hardiest variety.

"More and more the Government is trying to distribute food to the small shop keepers to encourage them to start business again in the devastated area. The Government offers all the facilities it can, gives an advance on the shopkeeper's eventual war indemnity, in other words makes a small loan, which will be deducted from the indemnity finally awarded for loss in the war.

"For rebuilding the houses the Government has two administrative sections in the technical service, which is under the Minister of the Liberate Regions: One, the Service of Extreme Urgence; two, the Service of Reconstruction. The Service of Extreme Urgence is trying to handle all immediate needs. It has a representative and supply centre in each arrondissement and canton, of which there are six to an arrondissement. These centres have stocks of emergency goods. They are supposed to have all that is necessary for repairs to farm equipment, for beginning housekeeping and farming. It has supplied tar paper for roofing and many tools, but the supply runs out rapidly and there is always a long list waiting for the first incoming shipment.

Development of Self-Help.

"The method of self-help is standing the refugee in good stead also. Often he sees what he needs on the military dump and he goes and helps himself. The Germans left 10,000 tons of coal in the Argonne back of St. Mihiel. Since this was discovered the refugees have been coming from miles around with such beasts of burden as they could get, a broken down horse, goats, dogs, with man-drawn carts or with sacks. They have come and gone day after day with their burdens of coal, which is rapidly disappearing. When the peasants see anything belonging to either the French or the American army they just take it. There is no deception or concealment about it.

"An entirely unexpected development and one that is surprising in view of the intense individualism characteristic of France is taking place in connection with the reconstitution of town life and the agricultural community. This development is one of cooperation. It is a movement of the best augury for the early recuperation of the country and at the same time it is a new revelation of the adaptability of the French temperament and spirit to the iron emergency of war and war's holocaust.

"Not only are the French Government and scores of volunteer associations assisting the refugees and sinistres to reestablish normal life in the devastated regions, but the afflicted ones are helping themselves, adjusting themselves to desperate conditions and making sacrifices for one another.

"The activity and vitality of the returning groups of refugees is shown in the fact that they have established scores of newspapers devoted to the interests of refugees in their particular localities, but especially it is shown in the establishment of reconstruction, agricultural and industrial cooperatives. Members of these cooperatives are pooling their resources and interests. They are rebuilding towns as a whole, the necessary buildings first, and looking at the town as a 'plant' instead of a group of individual one man plants. They are even rebuilding factories as a cooperative enterprise.

"There is in each department and in many of the arrondissements as well as in many of the cantons or communes a committee of refugees to look after refugee interests. These committees serve a variety of purposes. First, they register the addresses of refugee families, and they have instituted machinery for locating the widely separated members of a family. They assist not only in locating but in bringing back the members of a family. All these committees have headquarters in Paris.

"The work of these committees is recognized as one of important public utility, and they have been receiving subventions from the Minister of the Interior to assist in carrying on. The committees are supposed to be entirely out of politics, but latterly some of them have shown a tendency toward political activity.

"Many important groups have been created for special local purposes. One of the early interesting developments is the formation of the agricultural cooperative societies. This movement grew from the work of M. de Warren, who is connected with the office of agricultural reconstitution in the Ministry for the Liberated Regions. In 1917 and 1918 he was instrumental in establishing 120 agricultural cooperative societies in as many different communes of the Somme, Aisne and Oise. The movement was rapidly growing when it was wiped out entirely by the advancing Germans. The various members of the cooperative societies were distributed all over France as refugees. Now these societies are rapidly resuming and several hundred new ones have been formed.

"In these societies each member puts in all he has in the way of tools, machines, fertilizers, everything except his buildings and draught cattle. When it comes to the crops he can draw in proportion to what he put into the pool.

"From my experience I should say that this method of organization means from 50 to 100 per cent. increased efficiency in getting agriculture started again in the devastated districts as against what the individual could do working alone.

Reconstruction Cooperatives.

"The group of recostruction cooperatives is equally important. The principle by which these cooperatives work is much like that of the agricultural cooperatives. All the people of the town or village to be rebuilt join the society and pool the advances they are able to get from the Government on their ultimate war indemnities. An advance of 90 per cent. of the appraised value of the property before the war is given to members of cooperative societies, while individuals can get advances of only 75 per cent.

"After the people have pooled their indemnity advances they proceed to deal individually with the architect employed by the society. He furnishes plans according to the wishes of the individual, but he provides for the standardization of doors, windows, sanitary appliances, hardware, stable and chicken house fittings in order to save costs to the society as a whole and to get supplies as quickly as possible. The architect also undertakes to adapt his plans to the use of such building materials as are to be found on the spot, as by this means the towns will be restored most rapidly.

"Every ruined town and building in France when rebuilt will have some modification or improvement making for better health and greater attractiveness.

"To-day there is a bustling activity on the part of architects, engineers and contractors in France. Because houses have not begun to spring up by the thousands in the devastated regions some Americans have come to the conclusion that France is without plans and energy for tackling the job. Quite the contrary is the fact. The planning work for rebuilding the region in accordance with principles of modern sanitation, hygiene, household conveniences and farm economy actually began in 1914. It has culminated in a law compelling every town in the devastated regions as well as in many other sections of France to adopt approved town planning methods in rebuilding. Within three months every town in the 6,000 square miles of devastated France must have prepared plans for any section of the town where building operations are to begin. France is the first country in the world to pass a town planning law.

"Many of the ruined cities and towns in the devastated area of France will be restored so rapidly that in five, ten or fifteen years they will be a-hum with industry, improved with modern installations and more efficient and attractive than they were before the war. But a hundred towns and agricultural villages in the north, in the Somme, Aisne, Oise, Marne—what of them?

"Coming generations will walk in green silences through vast tracts of forest land to visit sites where these villages stood when they were reduced to mounds of debris by the great war. The reconstitution of French soil, the salvaging of 275,000 acres of land rendered uncultivable by war means that village after village—100 or more of them—and hamlet after hamlet will be wooded over—buried for all time.

"Recent investigation shows that there are something like 275,000 acres of land so far gone that there is no possibility of bringing it into use for farm land for another generation. The best modern science can suggest for this vast acreage is to plant trees and let it grow up in forest with the expectation that in thirty, fifty or one hundred years the leaf mould will have created a topsoil and the roots of the trees will have levelled the unevennesses. This 275,000 acres is out of the best and richest farming land of France.

"In the offices of M. Meitrot, head of the French Government Service for Reconstituting the Soil, is a room full of large military maps, showing the whole of the devastated regions, the trenches and dugouts and the regions most heavily shelled. On these maps are indicated in green the areas that are too far gone to be put back into cultivation and so must be planted with trees. For this purpose France is now buying carloads, boatloads of trees, and many of these are coming from America.

"In addition to this 275,000 acres rendered uncultivable by the war there are about 2,000,000,000 more that are in such a bad state with shell holes and trenches that it will require great labor to level them off, clean away obstructions, fertilize and in other ways prepare them for use. With the limited labor that is available it will be several years before this land can be put back into a state of high cultivation such as existed before the war, and this time will elapse in spite of the best use that can be made of the 275,000 German prisoners.

"Furthermore, to understand the problem of agricultural reconstitution in France, we must remember that 850,000 head of cattle were driven away into Germany when the Germans advanced. This is 85 per cent. of the total for the district. The same percentage of pigs was lost, or about 280,000. About 365,000 horses have disappeared either into the hands of the Germans or into the French army. The French army is now gradually releasing its horses, and to some extent this will remedy the acute shortage in work animals.

Preservation of Monuments.

"One of the enormous reconstruction problems ahead of France is the preservation of the churches and other historic monuments that were partly ruined and in thousands of cases almost completely destroyed. The number of these ruined monuments is almost impossible to estimate as yet and it will be months before the total number of buildings of value artistically and historically can be known.

"Before the war the French Government, through the Commission des Monuments Historique, had taken under its care and protection thousands of these buildings in all the departments of France. When put under the care of this commission these buildings could not be altered or used in any respect except as authorized by the Government. Because of the great plenitude of such art in France only a small proportion of what was of great value and interest had even been listed, and it is safe to say that the fourteen departments constituted one of the very richest sections in all the world in architectural treasures.

"One of the first tasks to be undertaken now is that of listing the thousands of additional monuments that shall be taken from the care of local authorities and put under the protection of the French Government to be safeguarded against hasty or thoughtless reconstruction, alteration, further disintegration and theft. This work is now being carried on by the French Government and one of the men assisting in the task is an American, Kingsley Porter, a member of the art faculty of Yale University. It is estimated the treasures to be protected and restored number somewhere near 50,000."

Rheims is one of the most interesting problems of this phase of reconstruction as will be seen from the following discussion by Major Ford:

"For one who used to know Rheims and studied the Cathedral in the old days it is a strange experience to go back now. The Cathedral, which was always a little monotonous in color and dry and hard in detail, has now become wonderfully mellow and even rich in color. There is a fascinating play of warm ochre tints and rich reds and even a suggestion now and then of blues and greens in the stone work due to the calcining of the stone when the staging, which was up against the front of the Cathedral, was burned in 1914. What with the fire and constant shelling since then many of the hardest lines have been rounded off and the formal regularity that was characteristic of the Cathedral has been softened into a picturesque variety of line and form which makes the Cathedral far more living than it was before.

Its Astounding Beauty.

"As one sees it at sunset with the cold tones of the lower part merging into the warm tones of the upper part against the sky, or as one sees it by moonlight with the light playing through the open interior, the Cathedral is now a thing ethereal of astounding beauty, though the wonderful sculptures around the entrance are mostly gone and a great deal of the sculpture and ornament all over the Cathedral has suffered irreparable damage.

"I have gone over the plans for restoring the Cathedral with M. Deneux. He has already French army engineers and German prisoners at work cleaning up the fallen parts of the Cathedral and sorting out parts of the sculpture and moulding. At Rheims now they exhibit unexploded shells which have been taken from the ruins in the interior of the Cathedral. These will remain at Rheims a permanent memorial to German barbarism.

"The first thing to be done toward the reconstruction and preservation of the Cathedral will be the erection of a temporary tar paper roof in place of all the destroyed roofing. Underneath this will be built as soon as possible a flat reenforced concrete roof directly on top of the vaulting. This roof will be visible neither from the interior nor the outside. Happily just before the war M. Deneux had finished a complete set of drawings of the roofing and the old wooden framework of the roofing so that if it is decided later to restore the roof just as it was before 1914, the project can be carried out exactly. It has not yet been decided to do this and it is possible that only the flat roof will be erected.

"The weakened and broken structural parts will be restored. The shell holes in the vaulting will be filled in. The tops of all the walls, the pinnacles and ornamental features that have been wearing away from exposure to the weather will be protected. The main mouldings will be restored. But the sculpture will hardly be touched. Nearly all will be left as it is, a permanent memorial. The precious glass will be remounted and the missing pieces will be supplied with good modern imitations. The organ and interior furnishings will be restored as they were. Within a year or a little more they will be holding services in the greatest memorial cathedral of France."